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Firm that flew shah to Egypt had CIA links

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Acting at the request of White House counsel Lloyd Cutler, a Providence business executive last month arranged for the deposed shah of Iran to fly from Panama to Cairo aboard an Oregon-based charter airline that has had recent ties to the Central Intelligence Agency.

Bruce G. Sundlan, president of the Outlet Co., a group broadcaster with diversified retail interests, said he arranged the shah's March 23 flight to Egypt after receiving a call from a State Department official in Washington. The official, whose name Sundlan could not remember, said he was acting on instructions from Cutler, who was in Panama at the time with White House chief of staff Hamilton Jordan.

Cutler, in a telephone interview, acknowledged initiating the charter arrangements. He said he did so on the request of the shah after a plane scheduled to be sent to Panama by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was delayed.

Cutler said he contacted the State Department operations center in Washington and left instructions to call Sundlan, an old friend who is also chairman of the board of Executive Jet Aviation Inc., a charter airline in Columbus, Ohio.

Sundlan, whose fleet of Lear jets was not capable of hauling the shah and his entourage more than 6000 miles from Panama to Egypt, instead contacted Evergreen International Airlines, a Newberg, Ore., charter company, which has had at least two links to the CIA in recent years:

- In 1975, Evergreen acquired most of the assets and many employees of Intermountain Aviation Inc., an Arizona airline officially acknowledged to have been owned and financed by the CIA.

- In addition, George Doole Jr., the man who for nearly 20 years controlled the CIA's worldwide network of secret airlines, is a paid consultant for Evergreen.

Both the CIA and Evergreen deny that the agency has any involvement with the company today.

The United States had hoped to persuade the shah to stay in Panama, fearing that his move might further complicate the hostage crisis in Iran, as well as cause difficulties for Sadat. But Cutler said he saw no conflict between that policy and helping to arrange the shah's flight from Panama.

"It was his decision that he should go to Cairo, rather than stay in Panama," Cutler said. "We urged him to stay, but once he made the decision, and asked for assistance, we complied with the request by putting him in touch with a private charter. We had no way to stop him from going. We weren't going to keep him in jail down there."

Cutler called Evergreen's ties with the CIA "very remote and past" and said he didn't learn of the connections until after the shah arrived in Egypt.

Cutler did express surprise at Evergreen's link with Doole, but cautioned against any speculation that the government wanted to choose an airline with CIA ties to fly the shah. "All of that is the purest kind of coincidence," he said.

But past or present connections between Evergreen and the CIA could serve to strengthen the hand of the Iranian militants holding Americans hostage in Tehran. The militants have sought to exploit every possible connection between the shah and the CIA, and have tried to portray the shah as a White House puppet.

Though little has been known about the US government's role in the shah's flight from Panama, officials in Washington have been concerned that Iran would view the move as an American plot designed to thwart Tehran's attempt to extradite the ex-monarch. And the shah's Evergreen charter left Panama just 24 hours before Iran's Revolutionary Council was to present Panamanian authorities with a formal extradition request.

Cutler said the United States played no role in extradition negotiations and that talks between the White House and Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr on resolution of the hostage crisis had "nothing whatsoever to do" with the shah's extradition. But in Iran, there are strong feelings that the reason the United States encouraged the shah to go to Panama in the first place, after his recuperation from surgery in the United States, was to protect him from any extradition proceedings.

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